SIX WHITE CADILLACS

A Thesis

presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of Cornell University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

by

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May 2019

ABSTRACT

This thesis exhibition and accompanying statement address issues surrounding fandom and queer identification with celebrity culture. Through found, altered, and fabricated objects—including sculpture, video, textiles, and digital prints—the artist investigates the affective ramifications of nostalgic attachment to outmoded artifacts of popular culture, including the possibility of "queering" such artifacts or otherwise redeeming their commodified forms in a search for pleasure, understanding, or communion with the gay icon.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Brice Peterson (b. 1989, Willingboro, NJ) is an artist, writer, and librarian concluding his work toward an MFA at Cornell University, where he is the recipient of the Charles Baskerville Painting Award. Recent exhibitions include: *Or High Water*, Safe Gallery, Brooklyn; *Six White Cadillacs*, Cornell University, Ithaca; *Big Boys*, Little Berlin, Philadelphia; *Big Snack*, Signal Gallery, Brooklyn; *Where We Find Ourselves*, Gershman Y, Philadelphia; and *Miami is Nice*, Spacecamp, Baltimore. He holds a BA from Brown University, where he received the Ann Belsky-Moranis Award in Visual Art, and an MLIS from Drexel University. Brice has also been an artist in residence at Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Snowmass Village, CO and the Post-Contemporary in Troy, NY. While at Cornell he curated the exhibitions *No Stone Unturned*, *Afterwardsness* (with Libby Rosa), and *Book/mark: Artists' Books at Cornell*. His debut collection of poems, *Sexy Person(s)*, was self-published in 2013.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My deepest thanks and appreciation to all those who have worked with and supported me during my time at Cornell, with special gratitude to my advisors, Stan Taft, Renate Ferro, Christine Elfman, and Michael Ashkin; to my collaborators and co-curators, Libby Rosa and Marsha Taichman; to my professors, Courtney Roby, Nick Salvato, Sabine Haenni, William Powhida, Linda Norden, and Douglas Ross; to the Teiger mentors, Dana Hoey, Sam Lewitt, Paul Pfeiffer, and Chitra Ganesh; to our graduate director, Carl Ostendarp; to Michelle Sinnigen and René Benda, for all their support; and finally, to Robert Whitehead, for his patience.

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Six White Cadillacs

The trope of the celebrity-obsessed gay man is as tired as it is true. We adore those celebrities with whom we identify, and in their images, we experience the potential for solace, kinship, and belonging in a society from which we are routinely outcast. During my own adolescence, at a time of burgeoning queer representation in mainstream media through shows like *Ellen* and *Will & Grace*, syndication instead permitted a nightly demonstration of alternative models of family and justice through the women of *The Golden Girls* and *Murder, She Wrote*, respectively. Ritualistic access to the rerun exposed the liberating potential of identification with strangers on the screen. That the stars of these shows were older women meant the characters could transgress where others could not: to a mainstream audience, their gender was no longer threatening; to the same audience, my sexuality would always pose a threat. Jessica Fletcher, the mystery writer-cum-amateur sleuth of *Murder, She Wrote*, could navigate and undermine institutions of patriarchal authority (the police, the corporate sphere, the academy, even—in one exemplary episode—the US Congress) specifically because her intellect and perspicacity were routinely underestimated. Blanche Devereaux, the vain and proudly promiscuous Southern belle of *The Golden Girls*, could fulfill a gay male viewer's desire to flirt, date, and love freely (and often). In an episode in which Betty White's character, the naïve Rose, has been exposed to HIV following a blood transfusion, Blanche offers a rousing defense of her right to seek sex in society built on shame and victimization.

As a child, I adored such women without understanding why; as an adult, I realize I was yearning for queer elders—searching for a history that had been denied to me. Where else is a child in the suburbs to turn but to the TV? It is inevitable that this recognition turns melancholic, becoming a lamentation of a lost or inaccessible queer past, what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls the "systematic separation of children from queer adults; their systematic sequestration from the truth about the lives, culture, and sustaining relations of adults they know who may be queer" (2). These famous women, then, are not idolized purely on their own terms but also for the roles they play as stand-ins for this lost access, as not only potential mothers or grandmothers but also possible avatars of the self. Yet these connections also engender a distorted sense of temporality in which queer identity forms belatedly or asynchronously. As Elizabeth Freeman describes, "synchrony is key to establishing a sense of engroupment, to implanting the affects and movements that make a person feel connected to something larger than him- or herself" (133). One thing that is perhaps "queer" about queer identity formation, then, is the possibility of *a*synchronous engroupment, especially as experienced through outmoded but perpetually accessible objects of high or popular culture. It is unsurprising that queer people would look to the popular culture of their own youth—their zodiac of celebrity—to make some sense of how they came to be. My expression of queerness, formed primarily by reaching back to such dated artifacts of celebrity culture, thus came to be based in range of slippery phenomena related to fandom, consumption, and nostalgia.

Yet, as dangerous cults of personality continue to proliferate, invigorated by the flattening of information on the web and the polarization and politicization of public spheres, I struggle with my ongoing attachment to celebrity culture and the

problematic norms it upholds. My artistic practice, through research, writing, curating, and making, deconstructs this attachment, particularly in relation to the possibility and desirability of representation at the dawn of the digital age. I am interested in the unsettling complications that result from a belated search for belonging within the terms and structures of late capitalism—the Sisyphean futility of "queering" commodified forms. By focusing on an era before queer representation was mainstream, my work highlights the friction between nostalgia and disillusionment, as adoration for yesterday's gay icons yields to mourning, and as acquisition—of their images, biographies, and merchandise—leads to liquidation. My reckoning with this fading queer past takes the form of both found and fabricated objects appropriated from consumer culture, giving form to the virtual celebrity and, with her likeness emblazoned on specific objects, suggesting the impossibility of communion with her ever-mediated self. These objects point to the temptation of queer self-identification within mass culture while also self-critically acknowledging its perils.

How do we exhibit our affection for and identification with celebrities of bygone eras? Time and again, Angela Lansbury has proven a fixation of mine—her talent ageless, her sagacity without limit. My previous work glorified these attributes in the form of the domestic shrine. Beginning with Helen Molesworth's writing on Duchamp's readymades in the context of domestic labor and later feminist artists (*At home with Duchamp: The readymade and domesticity*, 1998), I began to explore other methods of unsettling the space between the virtual celebrity and the material home, aided by referring to artists like Cady Noland, Robert Gober, Cary Leibowitz, and Jim Hodges, among others.

"Positive Moves (Vertical Blinds)" (Figure 1), featuring an image of Angela Lansbury from her home workout video, proved the beginning of an ongoing investment in found and fabricated objects from everyday life, ranging from blinds and chairs to pillows, plates, and perfume. I have since sought to expand the potential of being, in Sedgwick's terms, a queer and thus "perverse" reader of such mundane artifacts, while extending my appropriation of imagery to trouble the limits and desirability of representation within mass culture. "Onomasticon (Annie)" (Figure 2), demonstrates one such limit, as the icon is reduced to her name, and the material presence of the object itself—here, an illusory vinyl text bridging floor and wall—is called into question. "The Strange Case (1991, *Designing Women*)" (Figure 3), a three-tiered department store display with over one hundred framed stills from an episode of *Designing Women*, explicitly manifests the failure of media to effect meaningful political change, regardless of personal sentiment. The emblematic phrase, "HE DID IT," repeated over and over—originally in the context of the Clarence Thomas hearings—is at once empowering and feeble, as the cycle of patriarchal violence continues to churn. *There are so very few stars left.* (Figure 4), an accordion book of distorted celebrity studio portraits, wallpaper, and appropriated text, insists that such affective responses to mass produced images are no less genuine—the grief and melancholy expressed no less real—simply because the images themselves are not. In recognizing the borders of these conventions—the outlines of the celebrity's ambiguous self—we can begin to unpack the ways in which we trace, blur, and extend our own.

Figure 1. “Positive Moves (Vertical Blinds),” 2017; inkjet print on canvas with vertical blind hardware; 88 x 78in.

Figure 2. “Onomasticon (Annie),” 2018; custom vinyl lettering; 55 x 55in.

Figure 3. “The Strange Case (1991, *Designing Women*),” 2018;
inkjet prints and assorted metal frames on department store display; 42 x 42 x 57in.

Figure 4. *There are so very few stars left.*, 2018;
29-page accordion book (wallpaper, inkjet prints); pages 11 x 15in.

Simply expressing such adoration fails to capture its complicated essence—its inherent pathos, embarrassment, and humiliation. Fandom may ultimately prove a kind of prison, or more so, a crypt. Idolatry, after all, is blasphemy—a refutation of the promise of life after death. We pay homage and make offerings, but they are futile and bear no fruit. The idol has power as both representation and relic, but that power is confined by the structure in which it was formed. She has power on the screen, but does such power extend beyond? Can I manifest and thus submit myself to any such extension? Angela Lansbury continues to exist beyond my reality, and one day my yearning for communion will conclude in its ultimate failure, death.

In my thesis exhibition, *Six White Cadillacs* (Figures 5-12), I began to unpack the ways in which this failure may be embraced as a form of masochism, with images depicting Angela—both at her most benevolent as Mrs. Santa Claus and also at her most devious as Eleanor Iselin in *The Manchurian Candidate*—and objects presenting more potent representations of bodily flesh and pleasure. Objects of display become objects of exhibitionism as celebrity worship is recast as a fetishistic death drive. “Tumulus” (Figures 15-16), most explicitly juxtaposes bodily pleasure and bodily decay, placing a flesh-colored three-tiered jewelry stand and steel chain atop a grass carpet which covers a child-sized grave mound. “Stand” (Figure 14), enlarges the fleshy and phallic jewelry stand into an altogether more menacing and elegant form; here the dildo is both objet d’art and torture implement.

"Forced Deck (*Manchurian Candidate*)" and "Queen of Diamonds (*Manchurian Candidate*)" (Figures 17-20), extend the issue of representation and obfuscation to one literal extreme, pushing Angela's face into the darkness and leaving only her pearls—symbols of purity linked visually to the chain in "Tumulus" and ironically suggestive of her character's fascist aspirations—easily discernible. As the viewer moves through the space, the black, leathery surfaces of the stretched prints alternatively glow warm and cool, reflecting the color of the nearby red satin curtains, grass carpet, and fluorescent lights. Over time, new details in the stills emerge, and as Angela's expression grows more discernible, it further ensnares the viewer. The digitally corrupted video "He Needs Me (*Mrs. Santa Claus*)" (Figures 21-22) both introduces the color and texture of the curtains through the titular character's sensuous red gown and provides a foil for the darkness of the *Manchurian Candidate* prints. The treacly, sentimental song traces the character's desire to return home after a rebellious sojourn in New York City during which she has rallied child workers to protest poor conditions, navigated turn of the 20th century immigrant communities, and brought young lovers together. Mrs. Claus realizes that although her husband is usually the one giving gifts, *she* remains the one gift he needs. The video ends abruptly just as Mrs. Claus arrives to the stables where her reindeer are kept: her harried, distorted gaze suggesting anticipation, fear, and surprise.

Finally, "Salutations" (Figures 25-27), and "The Stranger Within" (Figures 23-24), conclude the exhibition with a suggestion of potentialities: figural jewelry stands that gesture, but fail to signify, and a printed fleece blanket that proposes a question both trivial and unanswerable. The hands, foot, and eggs on chrome-finished aluminum trays exhibit an erotics of pantomime as they press, hold, nest, and cage glossy plastic peppers, themselves androgynous symbols of intensity and

fertility. Nearby, the plush white fleece surface of “The Stranger Within” interrupts the flat surface of the wall as a kind of effete, sissified memorial plaque, unsure whether its own subject, Barbara Eden, is even in need of memorializing.

These objects, set against the dramatic red curtains, turn the gallery space into both boudoir and crypt, a space where desire and death co-mingle as they encircle the idol. Here a moribund longing is placed on parade, and in its failure of consummation it becomes onanistic, self-inflicting. The questions of possibility and utility remain: the exhibition conveys a genuine sentimentality, but what end does such affection serve? Does identification with the idol empower or obliterate? Angela, in her multiple guises, may in turn comfort, inspire, and threaten, and while the artist may depict such effects—or attempt their reproduction—the work itself inevitably circles back to the relationship between the true fan and his idol. Can such a gulf ever be collapsed? Perhaps not, but in this space exists ample room for drama and revelry—for humor, beauty, introspection, and, indeed, perversity.

Figure 5. *Six White Cadillacs*. Installation view.

Figure 6. *Six White Cadillacs*. Installation View.

Figure 7. *Six White Cadillacs.* Installation View.

Figure 8. *Six White Cadillacs*. Installation View.

Figure 9. *Six White Cadillacs*. Installation view.

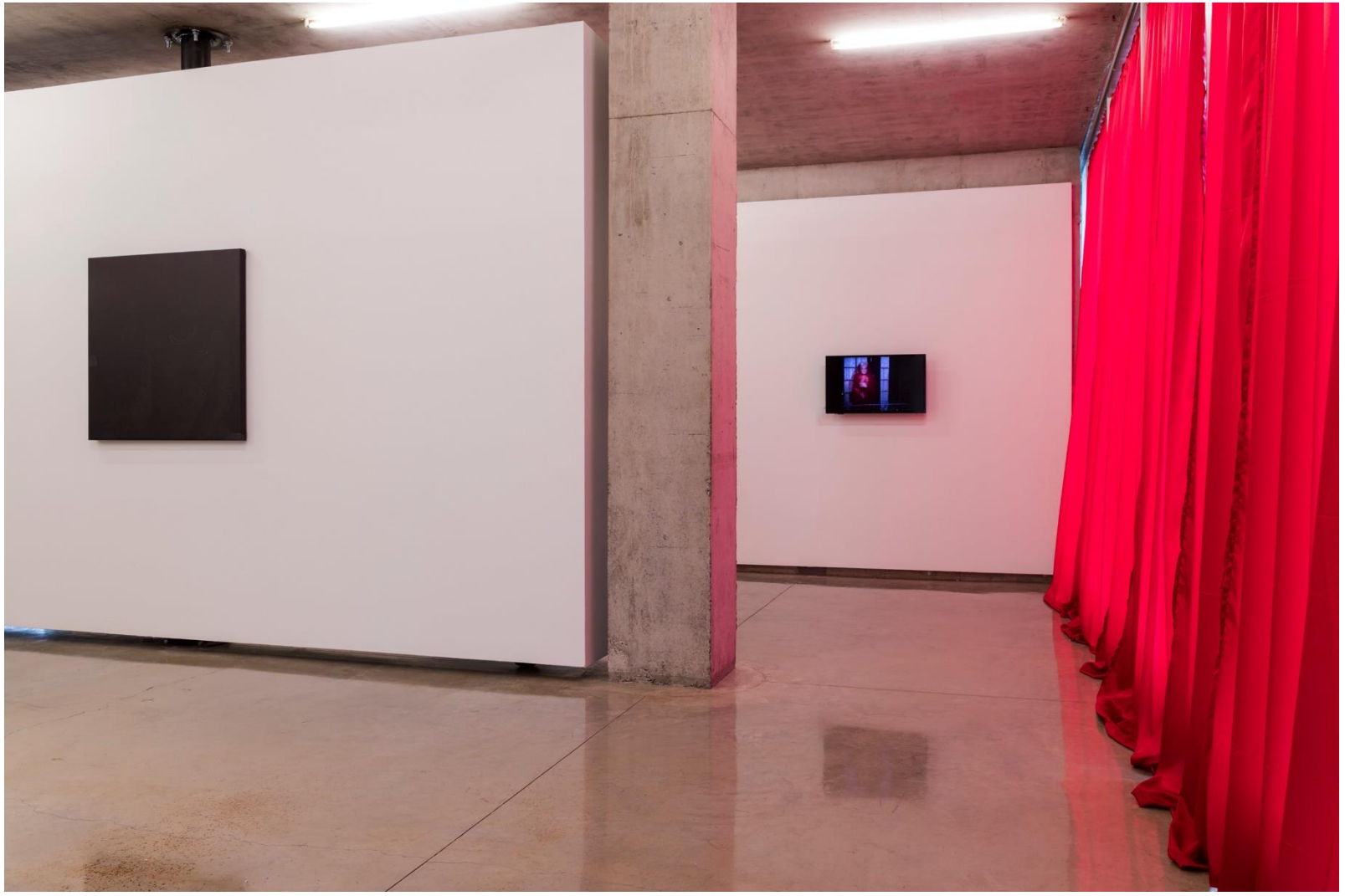

Figure 10. *Six White Cadillacs.* Installation View.

Figure 11. *Six White Cadillacs.* Installation View.

Figure 12. *Six White Cadillacs.* Installation View.

Figure 13. “I Wonder,” 2019; leather, plywood; 25 x 53in.

Figure 14. “Stand,” 2019; polymer clay, enamel, wood; 56 x 12 x 12in.

Figure 15. “Tumulus,” 2019; grass carpet, display stand, polymer clay, steel chain; 64 x 88 x 22in.

Figure 16. “Tumulus,” 2019; grass carpet, display stand, polymer clay, steel chain; 64 x 88 x 22in.

Figure 17. “Forced Deck (*Manchurian Candidate*),” 2019; inkjet print on canvas; 36 x 36in.

Figure 18. “Forced Deck (*Manchurian Candidate*),” 2019; inkjet print on canvas; 36 x 36in.

Figure 19. “Queen of Diamonds (*Manchurian Candidate*),” 2019; inkjet print on canvas; 36 x 36in.

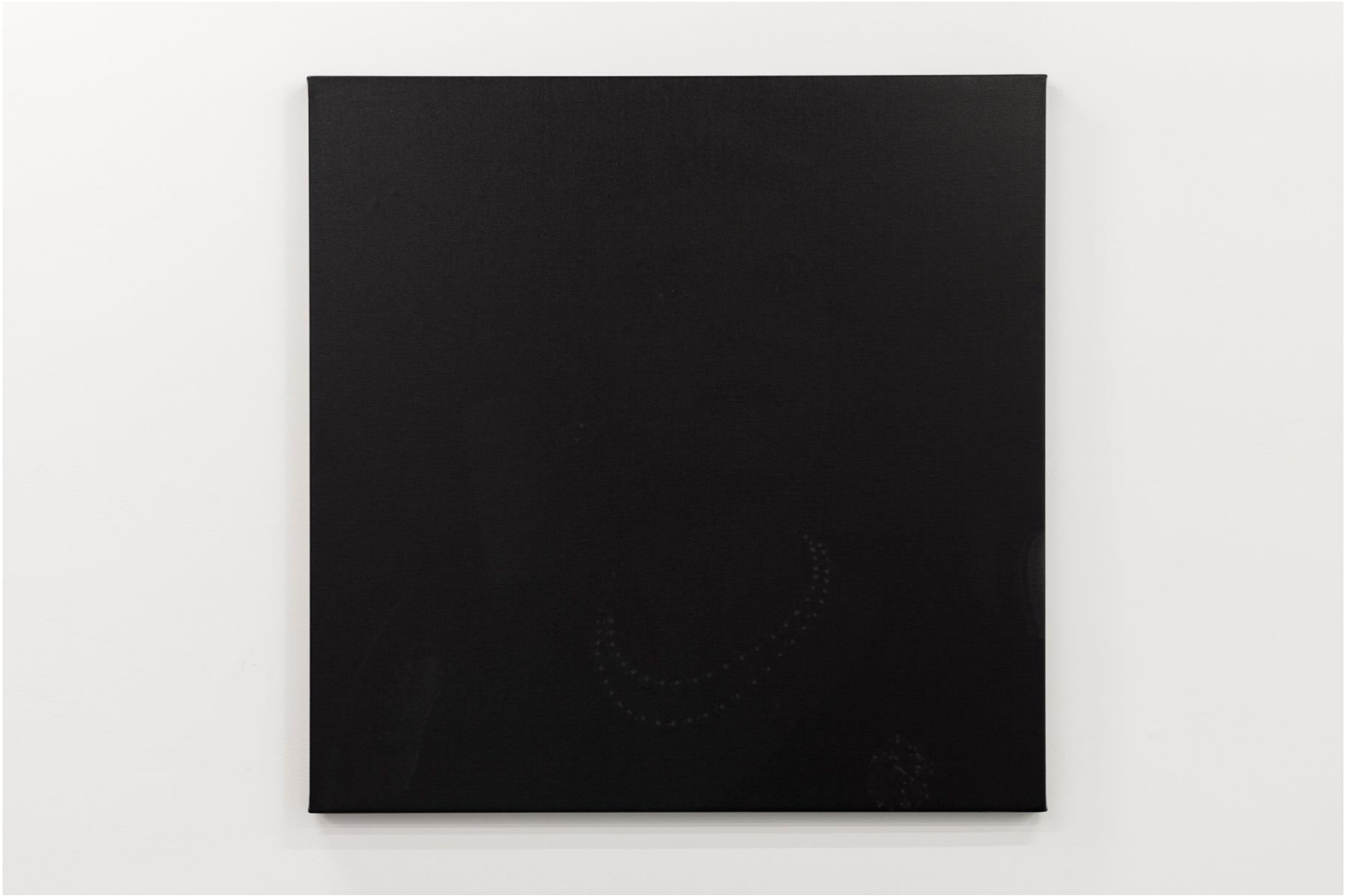

Figure 20. “Queen of Diamonds (*Manchurian Candidate*),” 2019; inkjet print on canvas; 36 x 36in.

Figure 21. “He Needs Me (*Mrs. Santa Claus*),” 2019; digital video; 6min 35sec. https://vimeo.com/333410862

Figure 22. “He Needs Me (*Mrs. Santa Claus*),” 2019; digital video; 6min 35sec. https://vimeo.com/333410862

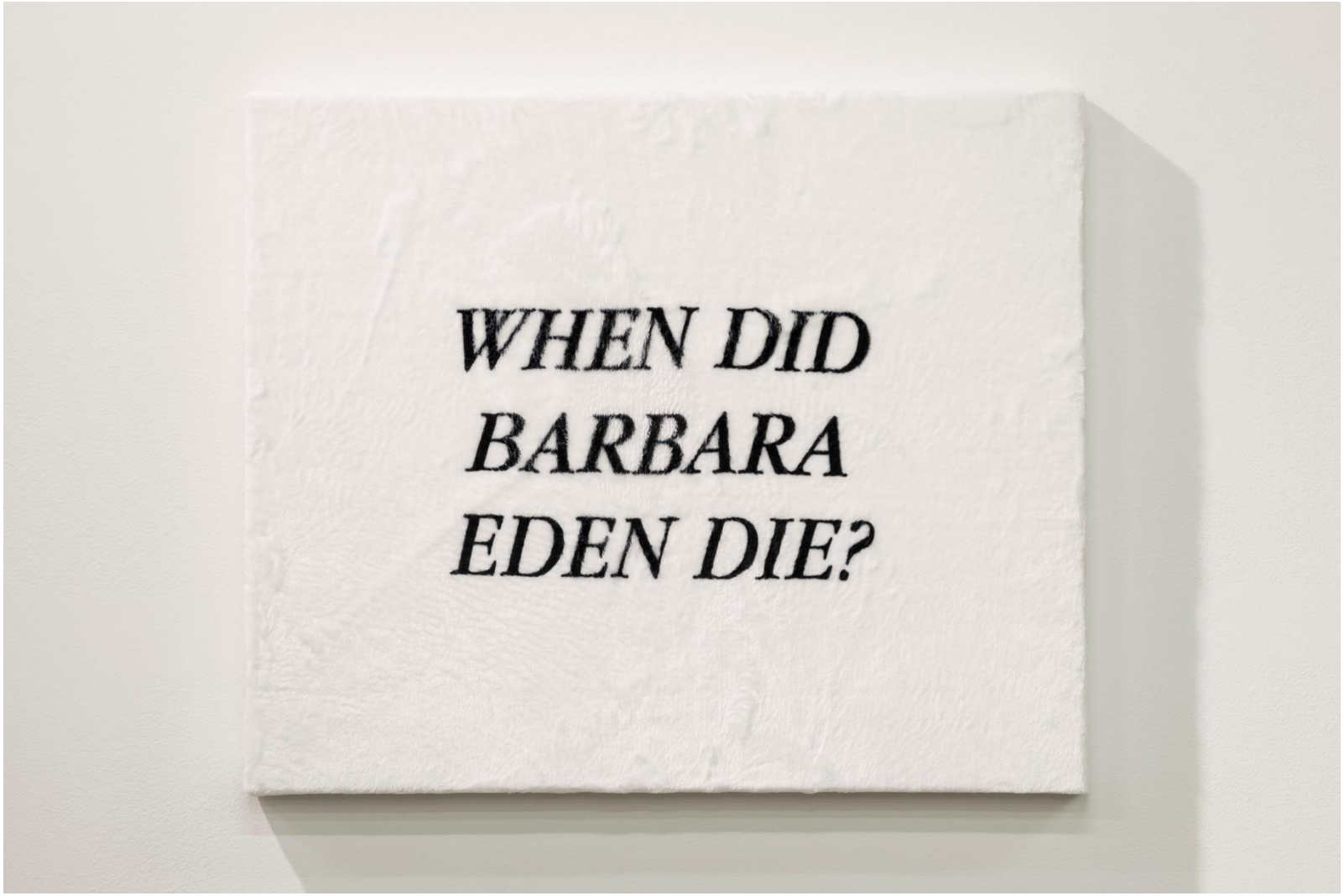

Figure 23. “The Stranger Within,” 2019; printed acrylic fleece; 20 x 24in.

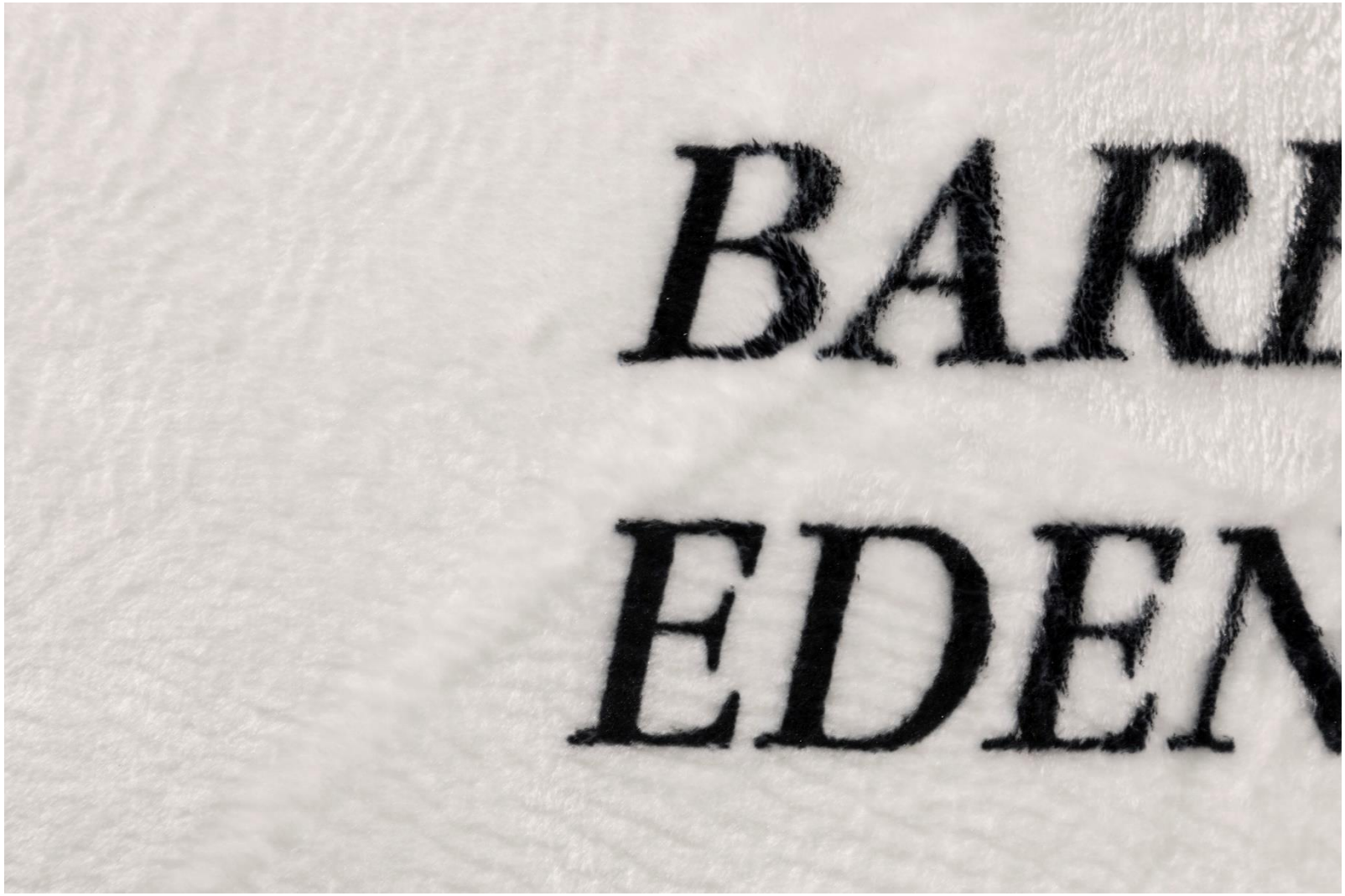

Figure 24. “The Stranger Within,” 2019; printed acrylic fleece; 20 x 24in.

Figure 25. “Salutations,” 2019; aluminum trays, polyresin and plastic display objects; dimensions variable.

Figure 26. “Salutations,” 2019; aluminum trays, polyresin and plastic display objects; dimensions variable.

Figure 27. “Salutations,” 2019; aluminum trays, polyresin and plastic display objects; dimensions variable.

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